

OBITUARY

Laurie Christie, 1929–2001

Laurie Christie, who died on 2 May 2001 after a long illness, was best known as a supplier of entomological specimens, equipment and books. Laurie was born on 22 August 1929, in Eastbourne, Sussex. He was interested in nature from a very early age, and when three or four years old was able correctly to identify plants which had been wrongly named by his parents. When he was seven his father became station master at Hackbridge on the edge of Mitcham Common, and his parents moved to South London, where Laurie was to spend the rest of his life.

He learned his entomology the practical way by collecting the butterflies and moths of the Common. He was very much a self-made man, and left school at 14, already with a lifelong interest in living creatures. He informed the Youth Employment Agency that he would only accept a job that involved working with butterflies and moths, which caused some problems, but then went to work at the natural history suppliers Watkins & Doncaster, situated in The Strand. When not working he would spend his evenings and weekends out collecting Lepidoptera. He was duly called up for National Service in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps from 1947–49. On one occasion, when the barracks were inspected by the Commanding Officer, Laurie refused to move his newly-set specimens off his bed. But instead of the expected dressing down, the CO spent a long time chatting to him, as he too was an enthusiastic entomologist. After the army, Laurie returned to Watkins & Doncaster. My own recollection, when I first visited Watkins & Doncaster as a complete novice in the mid 1950s, was of being served by a tall, thin and extremely courteous gentleman, who was genuinely keen to encourage and help a beginner such as myself.

Laurie was always happiest being his own boss, and left Watkins & Doncaster when their building was demolished for widening of The Strand. He set up his own entomological supply business, initially in partnership with a Captain Grenopp, who



sadly died within a couple of years. Laurie continued thereafter on his own, running his business from his parents' house at 137 Gleneldon Road, Streatham [South London]. The back room of the house was his office, store room and work bench in one, crammed with tremendous quantities of books, specimen boxes, cabinets and paperwork (fungus, as he aptly named it!). It was my privilege on occasions to work with Laurie at this time. Whatever he was doing—it might be stripping and repapering storeboxes, repinning and cataloguing a recently acquired collection, or packing orders for dispatch, Laurie always worked efficiently and with great humour and enjoyment. And he always insisted on the 'five minute breaks' when the biscuit tin would be unearthed from among all the shelves. He was a very traditional person, wary of new-fangled inventions such as 'Sellotape' and electronic calculators (let alone computers). Laurie had to supply all sorts of livestock, from snails (collected at night on Mitcham Common) for London Zoo, to hornets (with their stings manually removed) for film-makers at Elstree Studios. The highlight of Laurie's year was preparing for and manning his stall at the annual exhibition of the Amateur Entomologists' Society, after which Laurie would host a well earned meal for all his helpers on the day. Laurie in fact had a stall at the AES exhibition in every year except one until he died. He was also a long-time member of the British Entomological & Natural History Society.

As Laurie never drove, his many friends would also help by transporting him to see and buy equipment and collections. Two trips stand out in my memory: one to buy 100 army surplus generators for conversion to moth traps, and the other a double dash twice up and down the newly-built M1 to buy immense numbers of used storeboxes from Birmingham Museum. Laurie took all the trials and tribulations of these expeditions in his stride, confident that we would complete the journey despite breakdowns, overloading and his inability to cope with a map at more than walking pace!

Laurie used to join many of his friends on holidays throughout Britain, becoming 'Uncle Laurie' to all their families. His wide-ranging interests always added an extra dimension to holidays; he was always keen to find the 'bug of the moment' whether it be bluebottles, hoverflies, bees or lacewings. But he also had such a wide knowledge of the plants and environment around him, as well as being widely read and keen to discuss the books that he was then reading.

Laurie was a keen gardener, and he always liked to take visitors round his colourful garden, admiring not only the plants but also the cages of old bones set out to attract carrion beetles. When staying with friends, he actually enjoyed hand weeding, commenting on how different the weeds were from one garden to another.

Following the death of his parents, and his marriage to Sadie Goodson, Laurie moved in 1978 to Franciscan Road, Tooting, from where he continued his business despite increasingly poor health. From the early 1980s he and Sadie also ran a stall in Portobello Saturday market, selling books not just on natural history, but on a wide range of subjects, all of which seemed to interest Laurie. He was always alert to the needs of former customers, and I used to get little notes in the post asking if I was interested in buying any books that he thought might be of interest. Although attendance at the market became increasingly difficult in his later years, Laurie continued to trade from home when his health allowed, until his final illness. This he bore with his usual patience and good humour. He will be missed not only for the service that he provided to the entomological fraternity, but also as a friend to many who learned their first lessons in insect collecting on Mitcham Common with him. Our sympathies lie with his widow, Sadie, and his sister Janet.